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ABSTRACT

While the university-school connection has gained credence in teacher education, the quality of field experiences and the mentoring available in the placements is an important issue. Private schools in India are in the forefront of reform and innovations but are minimally involved in teacher education, presently the sole responsibility of colleges of education. Nonetheless, they could provide support for prospective teachers as sites for field experiences with practitioners playing the roles of models and critics. Barriers to their participation include lack of communication between teacher educators and teachers, perception of quality of preservice teachers, and a culture of hierarchy which places teacher educators above teachers. Clarification of roles can be inclusive of practitioners while maintaining the dignity and status of teacher educators. National and state organizations should equip teacher educators with interpersonal and entrepreneurial skills to enable them to establish relationships with private schools at both systemic and personal levels. (Contains 16 references.) (Author/SM)

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# A QUESTION OF ENTREE:

# FIELD EXPERIENCE AND PRIVATE SCHOOLS IN INDIA

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**Abstract**

While the university-school connection has gained credence in teacher education, the quality of field experiences and the mentoring available in the placements is an important issue. Private schools in India are in the forefront of reform and innovations but are minimally involved in teacher education, presently the sole responsibility of colleges of education. Yet they could provide excellent support for prospective teachers as sites for field experience with practitioners playing the roles of models and critics. Barriers to their participation include lack of communication between teacher educators and teachers, perception of quality of preservice teachers, and a culture of hierarchy which places teacher educators above teachers. Clarification of roles can be inclusive of practitioners while maintaining the dignity and status of teacher educators. National and state educational organizations should equip teacher educators with interpersonal and entrepreneurial skills to enable them to establish relationships with private schools at both systemic and personal levels.

# A QUESTION OF ENTREE:

# FIELD EXPERIENCE AND PRIVATE SCHOOLS IN INDIA

The benefits of College of Education (COE)-school partnerships in India have been recognized and advocated as an integral part of teacher education. The *National Policy on Education* (1986) recognized the need to overhaul the system of teacher education. The Committee for Review of National Policy on Education (1990) re-emphasized the need to involve teachers and teacher educators in leadership roles. It acknowledged that school-university collaborations are desirable but do not exist with teacher education "isolated from school, colleges and community" (p.300). In a top-down and bureaucratic such as India's system of government, it is not surprising that such connections are neither widespread nor easily established.

This article argues that in India where private schools are in the forefront of reform and innovations, they should be an integral part of teacher education. A short profile of private schools highlights what they have to offer preservice teachers. A brief description of teacher education programs in India, field experiences and constraints under which they are conducted provide a background to explain how and when school connections could be established. Finally, suggestions for involvement of private schools and necessary conditions are detailed.

**Private schools in India**

Schools in India are categorized as (a) public schools, which are run by the government, (b) aided schools, which are privately run but financially aided by the government and (c) private schools, institutions which are financially independent and have a fee structure for the students. Aided and private schools, unlike public schools, are not largely tied to government procedures

for regular and routine functioning. With few external regulations, they make their own decisions regarding budgets, staffing and curriculum.

Since private schools up to Grade 8 are not accountable to an external educational body, reliable educational statistics about private schools in India are not available (Kingdon & Dreze, 1998). Official statistics of a national board to which high schools are affiliated place the figure at almost 50% (Central Board of Secondary Education, 2001). It is estimated that 85% of secondary level school-going students in a metropolitan area attend private schools and the student-teacher ratio is 30:1 (Kingdon & Dreze, 1998; UNESCO, 1999). The number of teachers in private high schools, a significant percentage of the 2.5 million teachers in secondary schools (UNESCO, 1999), is a figure to be reckoned with.

There is a wide variety of private schools in India, dependent on the stringent parameters set by the boards of education to which they are affiliated. For example, private schools affiliated to the Central Board of Secondary Education are held to be better-performing than recently established matriculation schools that are affiliated to state boards of education (Venkatachalam, 1998). But as in many parts of the world, private schools in India largely have a better profile than public schools in terms of both success in examinations and quality of teaching personnel. Prestigious and catering mainly to a privileged section of society, their admission standards are higher and criteria for achievement more strictly applied than to students in public schools. The better facilities available in a private school enable more systemic, instructional and curricular innovations in education. (Gautama, 1997; Kingdon & Dreze, 1998; Surya, 2000).

They are also selective of the teachers they hire and demand a high level of efficiency, compensating for the large classrooms. The teachers are reputed to be better trained, more

dedicated and more focused on the academic achievement of their students than their counterparts in public schools (Ramanathan, 1998).

Thus private schools would be a rich resource for COEs requiring good models for teacher education students. Yet few systemic links between private schools and COEs have been established nor have connections been explored explicitly.

**Teacher education in India**

There are three models of teacher education to certify teachers for grades 9-12 are to be found in India. The most common one is the 9-month, one-year academic post-baccalaureate program. A four-year integrated model is another and distance learning or correspondence courses that qualify teachers is the third (Joshi & Thomas, 1991).

Teacher education institutions need to be recognized by the National Council for Teacher Education (NCTE) or the state Department of Education and are affiliated to it. As in the United States, they are either (state) government-funded or private institutions but in the United States, in matters regarding staffing, curriculum and experiences offered, the faculty do not have any decision-making authority. Admission and exit criteria and guidelines are detailed by the NCTE and implemented by the faculty in teacher education institutions (NCTE Act, 1993).

However, some COEs may apply for an autonomous status, permitting them to define their own curriculum in terms of courses they teach, provided they are approved by the state DOE. To qualify for such a status, institutions must provide proof of experiences additional to the requirement of the state DOEs in both quality and quantity (NCTE Act, 1993).

Description of field experiences in India

Field experiences are scheduled for a maximum of five weeks, usually in two blocks, encompassing three weeks of early field experiences and two weeks of student teaching.

Observation and microteaching are the major activities in early field experiences. COE instructors, or master teachers identified and invited by the COE, conduct demonstration lessons to illustrate specific skills and techniques. Preservice teachers observe these lessons and analyze them with a focus on methodology and 'good teaching practices.' They are also assigned to schools to observe teachers in their classrooms for about a week.

Microteaching, in which preservice teachers focus on practicing up to 12 discrete teaching skills, is another focal activity. A model of planning-feedback-multiple drafts-teaching-feedback-reteaching is adopted so that preservice teachers gain expertise in a set of skills and in writing lesson plans. Since technology is rarely available, camcorders are not used to record the performance for self-analysis. Peer groups make notes and share them with the designated teacher in a discussion led by the instructor.

During student teaching, which runs for two weeks, preservice teachers are not allotted to a teacher but to a class or subject area. They are expected to teach at least 20 periods of 40 minutes each, 10 in each of their two chosen content areas. The rest of the time may be devoted to preparing for their teaching or assisting the teachers or principal as required. For the most part, preservice teachers plan their lesson well before going to the site and have them approved by university personnel. They are also expected to produce records and files that document their learning and teaching.

Role of COE faculty in field experiences

Only regular, full-time COE faculty are responsible for the implementation of field experiences and the supervision of preservice teachers. They act as administrators, models, 'critics' and supervisors. They model good teaching and lead discussion in the demonstration lessons. They supervise preservice teachers in the microteaching activity and critique lesson

plans. As the sole evaluators in field experiences, they observe three lessons of the preservice teachers and provide immediate feedback. They also assess the preservice teachers on the files they produce at the end of the experience. However, they do not actively supervise the preservice teachers when they observe the cooperating teachers on site in the classrooms.

Involvement of practitioners in teacher education

Practitioners play two roles with preservice teachers: model and host, but in both instances the interaction is minimal. When they demonstrate a technique to preservice teachers, whether on campus or on site, teachers are not afforded the opportunity to conduct post-observation conferences or discussions, explaining their instructional techniques or lesson planning. There is no debriefing session that follows on-site observations in which preservice teachers may their findings with teachers (Ramanathan, 1999a).

As hosts, teachers provide the topic and permit student teachers to teach in their classrooms, perhaps once a day. However, their presence in the classroom when the student teachers are teaching is not required or mandatory. They may be expected to award grades which are not taken into account for the final grade the student teachers receive as part of the field experience (Ramanathan, 1998)

COEs recognize the potential and quality of teachers in the private schools and acknowledge that the teacher education preservice teachers benefit by observing them and interacting with them. Teachers in private schools are perceived as likely to be more conscientious about and skilled in their role as supervisors (Ramanathan, 1999b).

Teachers in private schools seem reluctant to let preservice teachers into their classrooms especially if they have not had advance notice. In some cases, they have refused to host even after an initial agreement (Ramanathan, 1998).

Teachers are not provided professional development by COEs for the roles of mentor and supervisor. COEs do not arrange meetings to explain the field experiences or the purpose of the student teaching experience or conduct workshops to acquaint teachers with observation instruments or evaluation practices (Ramanathan, 1998).

Most private schools are English-medium, delivering instruction in it, and teachers are required to have a good command of the language. Preservice teachers from public COEs are more likely to lack expertise in English and so teachers and administrators in private schools may decline to place them into their classrooms. Though prestigious private schools can choose their candidates, stereotyping preservice teachers from state-funded institutions works against placements for them in such schools so that even those preservice teachers who may meet the high academic and language standards of private schools are frequently not accommodated (Ramanathan, 1999b).

However, private schools are not called upon to provide master teachers for demonstration classes. Nor are the teachers and administrators in the schools involved in the assessment of the preservice teachers at any stage. Thus innovations in private schools are seldom reflected in COE curricula (Ramanathan, 1999b).

**Systemic involvement of private schools in teacher education**

Many considerations such as the perception of quality of preservice teachers and issues of compensation are barriers to placement of preservice teachers in private schools. Since private schools are not required to host preservice teachers, early field experiences and student teaching are primarily sited in public schools. However, private COEs appear to accommodate the demands and needs of private schools more than public COEs do and have an easier entrée into them (Ramanathan, 1999b).

In private schools preservice teachers are generally not permitted to teach grades 10 or 12, which have to take crucial examinations conducted by the affiliating boards of education at the end of the academic year in March-April. COEs believe that private schools are so focused on student achievement, especially in these examinations, that they do not choose to spend any energy on teacher education (Ramanathan, 1998).

Timing of field experiences inhibits placing preservice teachers in private schools. Observation and demonstration, which are usually scheduled for a week in July and August, may be accommodated since the schools are in session and no examinations are scheduled. The capstone experience of student teaching should ideally take place at the end of the academic year to enable preservice teachers to link theory to practice. However, in February and March most schools are preparing for their annual examinations and the focus is on revision and remediation rather than on teaching new material so that student teaching will serve a very limited purpose.

Finally, unlike state-funded schools, which appear to accept their limited role in teacher education as a given, private schools expect to be compensated for their efforts. While the amounts may be modest and the gifts only tokens of appreciation, such gestures are appreciated. Private COEs which fulfill these expectations have less difficulty finding placements in some of the lesser-known private schools but most COEs have no budget that enables them to pay for services rendered by private schools nor do university faculty approve of compensating cooperating teachers for what they feel should be viewed as a service rendered to the profession (Ramanathan, 1998). However, prestigious schools by and large do not appear willing to be involved in teacher education at any price.

**Issues, concerns and considerations**

The private school-university connection is practically non-existent in India. The difficulties of involving private schools in field experiences are both philosophical and procedural and can be attributed to four major factors: (a) The culture of hierarchy is prevalent in India; (b) responsibility for teacher education rests exclusively with COEs; (c) communication between schools and COEs is lacking; and (d) professional skills of teacher educators are minimal.

In India, teaching at an institution of higher education is considered more prestigious than teaching in a school. This may be why teacher educators do not readily communicate with schoolteachers or expect to work with them. Since teachers are seen as recipients of teacher educators' expertise, acceptance of equal partnership may be unrealistic. If teacher educators are to invite teachers to collaborate, they must feel confident that their position and image are not compromised.

Tacit understanding of this situation may have prompted The National Council for Teacher Education (NCTE), vested with the authority to oversee teacher education in India (NCTE Act, 1993), to remain silent on the role of schools in teacher education. While COEs have been involved in the deliberations of the NCTE, school personnel have been ignored in the decision-making process. None of the NCTE publications mentions schools as significant contributors to training teachers. Nor has the role of teachers as mentors or cooperating teachers been addressed. Thus teacher education is seen as the exclusive domain of COEs and schools are absolved of all responsibility in this regard.

At the institutional level, COEs do not share their philosophy or responsibilities with the schools which are seen merely as placement sites. Communication between the colleges and

schools is minimal. Since teacher educators have no overt or implicit expectation of a triadic relationship but are almost exclusively responsible for orienting, guiding and evaluating preservice teachers, it is not surprising that schools do not feel involved in the process of training future teachers.

The qualifications of teacher educators as pedagogical experts or liaisons is a concern. Their skill to develop and maintain relationships with schools has been neither cultivated nor put to the test. Their ability to offer continuing professional development has also been questioned (Raina, 1997) so that private schools may have some grounds for their skepticism of university faculty as resource persons for such opportunities.

**Possible scenarios**

The present status of school-university relationship in India is similar to one that existed in the United States three decades ago, before early field experiences and professional development schools (PDSs) were advocated. However, establishing a working relationship between COEs and schools, if not the closeness of PDSs, is not beyond the scope of the institutions, provided there is a willingness to make the effort. Since COEs now bear the onus of teacher education, it is their responsibility to reach out to private schools and include them in the process.

First, at a systemic level, all COEs could match their calendar with that of private schools. This will enable them to schedule observations in July and August. Teachers will also be available to demonstrate lessons and instructional strategies.

Second, teacher educators must be entrepreneurs and establish relationships with administrators and teachers at both systemic and personal levels. Rather than be confined to the college premises, they need to acknowledge, recognize and value the expertise, innovations and

models of good teaching available in private schools. Many teachers in private schools are alumni of COEs; teacher educators could maintain this contact and urge them to facilitate field experiences. Teacher educators who can act as liaisons with schools in general and private schools in particular must be identified and recognized. They must be equipped with interpersonal and managerial skills to help them in this role.

Third, to maintain the dignity and status of teacher educators, the roles of both parties must be clearly defined and their spheres of influence kept distinct. For instance, teacher educators could work on the campus as guides and evaluators, aiding in the planning and assessment of performance while teachers could be models demonstrating practices of good teaching in schools and orienters, introducing preservice teachers to the contexts of teaching.

Fourthly, school personnel could be reminded of the advantages of 'home-grown' products. After all, administrators could gain from getting in on the ground floor, as it were, being introduced to prospective teachers and having input into their training. Such opportunities could be cultivated both on campus and on site. For example, identified master teachers in private schools can provide demonstration classes. Principals of private schools could serve on examination committees, giving them an opportunity to examine and comment on the process and product of the teacher education programs. This may facilitate COEs to maintain closer connection with and be informed about innovations that occur in private schools.

Finally, incentives or compensation to private schools do not have to be in the form of money. They have a great need for professional development for their teachers and teacher educators could identify appropriate areas, for which must be given special training for outreach purposes and aided to become effective resource persons. COEs, especially those designated

Institutes of Advanced Study in Education, have facilities for inservice training that could be made available to private schools.

For these suggestions to be effective, national and state organizations such as NCTE, National Council for Educational Research and Training (NCERT) and State Councils for Educational Research and Training must step into the breach and work with teacher educators. At present there are hardly any substantive programs that provide teacher educators opportunities for professional growth or to acquire leadership skills. The materials designed by NCERT for the distance education pilot project is a tentative effort not focussed on identified needs of teacher educators. It does not seek to extend their role or expand their leadership skills. These national and state organizations must re-think the role of teacher educators and facilities their professional development in spheres so far not traditionally recognized. For teachers in India to be provided the best education possible, all the resources available must be tapped, including the wealth of experience in private schools and teachers.

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